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AUTHOR *Stevens, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

It is imperative that counselors understand the difference in their personal perspective of what constitutes a family and the perspective of others, as well as the difference in personal perspective and "scientific knowledge". Beginning to acknowledge these differences is the first step in integrating diversity into counseling skills. This article presents a class exercise to assist students in becoming aware of their own idea of family as well as a tool to use with clients in order to determine their definition of family. In addition, it presents results of a survey that determined what the concept family means in theoretical terms. One distinctive finding was that American students tended to define family in relationship to the appearance of children in the household, which did not hold true for other populations. The pastoral counseling group tended to define family by blood ties that inhabit the same physical structure. Malaysian students overwhelmingly defined family within the context of their religious and cultural beliefs in which only those individuals who are related by blood or marriage are considered family. The recommendation is that counselors continue to examine what family means to various populations and cultures since counseling clients from other countries is becoming more common. (JDM)

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What Exactly Is A Family?

Patricia Stevens, Ph.D.

Dr. Stevens is an Associate Professor and Director of the Marriage and Family Training Program at the University of Colorado at Denver. She was a recent Fulbright Scholar with an appointment In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. She is the Chair of the Ethics Committee for the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors and is the IAMFC representative to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP).

Introduction

Ask anyone to tell you who is in their family and they will inevitable give you a list of individuals. Ask the next person the same question and you will, most likely, get a different answer. And yet, we all know what - and who - is family. Are do we? "We all have our conceptualization of our own family and at the same time we believe that we know what family is and even what *the* family is" (Levin & Trost, 1992, p. 348). It is this belief that we know what *the family* is that concerns the author in training marriage and family counselors. It is imperative that we as helpers understand the difference in our personal perspective of family - our own and *the family* - and the perspective of others as well as the difference in personal perspective and "scientific knowledge". Beginning to acknowledge these differences is the first step in integrating diversity into our counseling skills.

What is My Family?

In teaching marriage and family counseling classes I use many exercises to assist students in beginning to understand who they consider to be their family. As Bowen believed, it is necessary to understand our own family of origin before we attempt to work with others. And, although it is not necessary to have solved all our own issues, awareness is certainly an imperative before - and while - counseling others. One exercise that is particularly insightful for students comes from and article by Levin and Trost (1992). In the first class session, before any material has been introduced, I ask students to take a blank sheet of paper and, using circles for females and triangles for males, to draw their family. I also instruct them not to connect these circles and triangles with lines. No further instruction is given. I then allow students approximately 10 - 15 minutes to complete their family map.

After completion, we divide into groups and I ask them to discuss the following questions:

1. Who did you include in your family?
2. Who did you not include?
3. Examine the distance/closeness of the individuals on your family map. What do you think this means? Does this represent how your family functions?
4. Examine placement of members on your map (How the members were placed on the sheet - in hierarchical forms, circle, etc. Who is next to whom? Who is above/below whom?) Does this represent your family alliances?

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5. What would the map have looked like a month ago? What might it look like a year from now?

Students always find this exercise to be extremely enlightening. They are amazed at whom they included or excluded and how this "simple" exercise provides a great deal of accurate information about their family functioning. The other insight that comes from this exercise is the recognition of the different family forms that emerge. Inevitable multiple forms of family are presented in this exercise, allowing students to understand that each person's perspective of family is different.

Student participants are usually very open and candid about their families in this exercise. It is important, therefore, to preface any self-disclosure exercise a caution about confidentiality. My students are asked to use the same criteria for their class discussions as they would with clients, e.g., any information gained in class stays in class. This exercise, as do many other self-disclosure exercises, places the instructor in the position of modeling good ethical and professional behavior. As role models, we need to model the openness that we ask of students as well as being cautious of judgmental remarks or actions. One way to model openness is to diagram your family on the board for students. This gives positive messages about self-disclosures, acceptance, and being open without sham (Levin & Trost, 1992).

What is *The Family?*

The next step is to discuss what is theoretically meant by family, or what constitutes *the family* (Trost, 1988, 1990a, 1990b). As previously discussed, individuals have many different conceptualizations of family but we also have a more or less generalized concept of family (Gubrium & Holsein, 1990). This general concept may be based upon theory, social reality, normative ideas, or legal constraints. However, no consensus exists for this definition. One suggestion for beginning a congruent definition is to start with the spousal or cohabitation unit and the parent-child unit (Trost, 1988). With these two definitions, family could be defined as a "social group consisting of at least one parent-child unit or at least one spousal [or cohabitation] unit" (Levin & Trost, 1922, p. 350).

The idea of using dyadic pairs to define family would means that one could analyze any sort of family-like group. This definition allows for friends, aunt-niece, grandmother-grandchild, cousin dyads, and so forth. Almost any sort of dyadic pairing could then be defined as a family. Household is sometimes synonymous with family. In this case (and seen in the survey results) moving out of the household as in cases of divorce would be to leave the family (Isaacs & Levin, 1984).

In order to gain a better understanding of what constitutes *the family* a variety of populations were sampled using the survey developed by Levin and Trost (1992). They originally distributed the survey to 1,500 men and women ages 20-59 in the Uppsala province of Sweden. I have subsequently distributed the survey to students in the counseling psychology and counselor education program in a western American graduate school, pastoral counselors, counselors attending an international counseling conferences, and students at the Universiti

Kebangsaan Malaysia. The data gathered from these surveys are presented in Table 1.

Several particularly interesting findings emerged from these surveys. The first finding was that American student participants tended to define family in relationship to the appearance of children in the household. This distinction did not hold true in the other populations. Another interesting distinction came from the pastoral counseling group. This group tended to define family by blood ties that inhabit the same physical structure. Also, this group more clearly defined family within the context of the religious and/or legal constraints of marriage, which disallowed cohabiting couples to be defined as family. This was not, however, unanimous but was a majority response. In contract, the Malaysian students overwhelmingly defined family within the context of their religious and cultural beliefs. Only those individuals who are related by blood or marriage are considered family, and the responses were highly cohesive. Also, household, or living in the same residence, did not seem to be a defining factor. In fact, several students commented that they did not understand the necessity for the question - which provides a much stronger idea of their belief system than does the data.

Conclusion

It is essential to understand the concept of family in this global and diverse society in which we now live. Counseling with clients from different countries is becoming more common as the world continues to "shrink". Also clients within our own country of origin may have a culture that is different from our own.

This article presents a method to assist students in becoming aware of their own idea of family as well as a tool to use with clients in order to determine their definition. Last, the article presents a scholarly means of determining what the concept "family means in theoretical terms. Continued examination of this concept with various populations and cultures is recommended.

Table 1
Percent Who Classified Example as Family

Question	Student	Counselors	Pastoral	Intl Counselors	Malaysians
One	96.2	96.1	96.2	98.9	
Two	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	
Three	98.9	100.0	98.3	98.8	
Four	83.9	90.8	80.3	90.4	
Five	41.6	33.6	45.9	96.2	
Six	79.6	82.2	78.3	97.4	
Seven	96.2	95.4	96.6	24.6	
Eight	66.5	65.1	67.2	18.6	
Nine	62.2	68.4	59.0	22.1	
Ten	87.3	94.1	83.3	15.4	
Eleven	53.6	50.0	55.5	94.6	
Twelve	84.4	87.5	82.8	92.8	
Thirteen	91.6	90.1	92.4	15.4	
Fourteen	59.3	63.2	57.2	16.5	
Fifteen	70.6	72.4	69.7	12.5	

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